Address to the nation by Taoiseach Micheál Martin, Friday 17 December

Dia dhaoibh

Right now, as I speak to you, the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus is exploding throughout Europe.

I spoke with European leaders yesterday, and the level of concern about what is coming is the highest that I have seen.

We are still in the early days of this new wave and data is still being collected, but already it is very clear that we are dealing a hugely transmissible strain of the disease, with studies showing that it is many times more transmissible than the Delta variant.

It is here, in our country.

And we are going to see a massive rise in infections.

Already, in just a few days, more than a third of all new cases in the country are as a result of Omicron.

The challenge we face, as a government and a people, is how we slow the rise in infection that is coming and how we prevent it from getting out of control.

Left unchecked, this new strain will represent a very significant threat to hospital and critical care, but also a threat to all of society and the economy.
It spreads so aggressively, throughout all age groups, that we are likely to see infections at a rate that is far in excess of anything we have seen to date.

It is that serious.

I have seen some commentary that this all feels like déjà vu and that we are back where we were a year ago.

I understand why some people might feel like that,

but it isn’t true.

This time last year, we couldn’t leave our county. Much of our hospitality sector was closed entirely.

We are in a much, much stronger place than we were.

We have one of the very best vaccination rates in all of the world and our booster programme is powering ahead. Seeing lines of people waiting for their jab in every corner of the country is an inspiration.

Over the last three days alone, more than 160,000 people have had their booster.

More than half of all medically vulnerable people in the country have received it.

And everything that can be done to get this into people’s arms, is being done.

Our GPs, including many who have retired, our community pharmacists, and our HSE teams in vaccination centres are being deployed in a great national effort that has already seen us achieve the fourth highest rate of booster delivery in Europe.

Our testing capacity – both PCR and antigen – is also being ramped up significantly to ensure that people are protected and that we have an accurate picture of the progress of the disease.

Once again, I thank from the bottom of my heart all those of you on the frontline of our health system for your extraordinary service over the course of almost two years in dealing with this pandemic.

You have saved many lives.
I really cannot over emphasise how important it is for everyone to get vaccinated and get your booster – the science is absolutely clear on the benefits, and the protection it gives us from serious illness, hospitalisation and death.

The science could not be clearer.

However, with the Omicron variant it is also becoming clear that vaccines on their own aren’t going to be enough to get through this wave safely.

The European Centre for Disease Control has in recent days issued very clear guidance that all across Europe there needs to be a very strong and immediate reduction in contacts between people in order to prevent Omicron overwhelming us.

We have been in close contact with our own public health officials over the course of this week.

And last night, the Chief Medical Officer and the National Public Health Emergency Team provided the government with advice on what we might do as a country to achieve this.

The need to move quickly and take action to reduce social contact is clear.

The need to slow the spread of Omicron and get more people boosted is clear.

The need to act now and prevent many more people getting sick is clear.

Based on all of this, based on our public health advice and based on our observation of how Omicron is ripping through the population in other countries, we have decided that the following restrictions will be introduced from this Sunday, until 30 January:

- all restaurants and bars, excluding takeaways or delivery services, must close at 8pm
- there should be no indoor events after 8pm
- for indoor events scheduled earlier in the day, attendance should be limited to 50% of venue capacity or 1,000 people, whichever is lower
- attendance at all outdoor events should be limited to 50% of venue capacity or 5,000 people, whichever is lower
- wedding receptions can take place after 8pm but with a capacity limit of 100 guests
• restricted movement advice for all close contacts will be enhanced. For those who have received a booster at least one week ago, they will have to restrict movement for five days and take three antigen tests
• for those that have not yet received a booster, they must restrict their movement for ten days. The HSE will consider the best testing regime for people in this category
• all people arriving into the country from overseas will be required to have an antigen or PCR test in line with their vaccination or recovery status
• and all passengers arriving in Ireland should now be advised to conduct antigen testing on a daily basis for a period of five consecutive days commencing on the day of arrival

None of this is easy.

We are all exhausted with COVID and the restrictions it requires. The twists and turns, the disappointments and the frustrations take a heavy toll on everyone.

But it is the reality that we are dealing with.

We cannot wish it away, and there is no silver bullet to fix it.

We talk about living with COVID and some believe that this means just going back to how we did things before it arrived.

It doesn’t.

It means understanding the disease, monitoring it, making changes when it changes and doing whatever we need to, to protect people’s lives, health and livelihoods.

The news this evening will be deeply disappointing for many.

It is not the news I wanted to bring you, nor is it the news you wanted to hear.

However, and this is important, the truth is that we are in a much better place than we were this time last year.

And we will be in a much better place in 2022. The new year will bring new anti-viral drugs and new therapeutics.

Our economic recovery has been much stronger than anyone predicted and this will endure next year.
We just need to get to the other side of this Omicron wave as safely as possible.

As we have done throughout this COVID crisis, we just need to remember that each of us is responsible for all of us.

We will come through this latest setback as we have come through everything else that COVID has thrown at us – together.

We may have to dig a little bit deeper to access it this time, but the unique resilience, solidarity and trust in science that has marked Ireland out across the world will get us through this too.

This Christmas, please be safe and look after each other.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh.